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Auditory Similes in the Homeric *Iliad*

AUSTEN HALL

The similes of the *Iliad* are thematically complex, multiply referential, and richly emotional; as a result, they have received ample attention in the literature. Most of these attempts at analysis fall within one of two distinct lines of inquiry, attending to either what I refer to as the *historical* question or to the *aesthetic* question. The historical question is concerned with determining at what point and in what manner the various similes of the *Iliad* were developed as integral elements of the poem. The aesthetic question, on the other hand, deals specifically with the stylistic, thematic, and emotive functions of the *Iliad's* similes without reference to any extra-textual concerns. In other words, analyzing the poem's similes within a purely aesthetic context requires considering *only* their relevant function in contributing to the style, thematic program, and emotional weight of the work *qua* work of epic poetry, irrespective of the poem's historical development. These two lines of inquiry can be further distinguished from what might be called the *performative* question. This last question is concerned with what function the similes had during bardic performances in the poem's purely oral stages; perhaps they functioned as formulaic tools for maintaining the required meter or as means for rhapsodic improvisation. I do not possess the requisite knowledge to productively address either the historical question or the performative question, and thus leave the task of analysis in these areas to more qualified scholars. Instead, I will limit the scope of the forthcoming discussion to specific issues in the aesthetic¹ realm.

¹ I use aesthetic to differentiate this question from the historical and performative, not as the general term to indicate concern with beauty or appreciation of beauty. All uses of "aesthetic" in this paper should be understood as adhering to the former usage.

There are myriad approaches to systematizing, categorizing, and evaluating the similes of the *Iliad* according to their aesthetic properties. So varied and rich are the existing answers to the aesthetic question, in fact, that a sufficiently detailed survey of them within the limited space of this paper is not possible. This does not mean, however, that nothing interesting may be said about these analyses as they have been hitherto formulated. Much of the existing discussion is unified, conspicuously, by a focus on the *visuality* of the Iliadic similes; these similes are analyzed and interpreted primarily with an emphasis on a certain *visual* function. Complex accounts of the stylistic, thematic, and emotive functions of these similes have been proposed, but at the basic *sensory* level these accounts evaluate the similes in terms of what they are meant to make the reader or listener *see*.

This approach, I believe, is a natural and useful way of assessing many of the similes in the *Iliad*, as the majority of the similes in the poem are primarily visual in nature. In fact, these visual similes are nearly ubiquitous. The sight of the glowing bronze of the Greek army is compared to “a fire raging through endless forests” (II. 485-87), the Trojan forces are likened visually to “cranes beating their metallic wings / In the stormy sky at winter’s onset” (III. 5-10), Gorgythion’s sagging head is connected to the image of “a poppy / In a garden, heavy with seeds and spring rain” (VIII. 310-311), and Athena and Achilles are both said to look like stars (IV. 85-88, XXII. 33-37). In one pair of repeated similes, Paris and Hector are each compared to a galloping horse: “*Picture* a horse that has eaten barley in its stall / Breaking its halter and galloping across the plain” (VI. 533-538, XV. 266-271). With the imperative “picture” the visual function of the simile is made verbally explicit; it is clearly meant to facilitate specific *visualizations* of Paris and Hector in the mind of the audience member. We *see* the rejuvenated warriors moving with the speed and exuberance of a freshly fed stallion “sure of his splendor” in our mental construction of the

scene (VI. 537, XV. 270). These examples, it seems, are representative of the majority of the similes in the *Iliad*; the general rule for the function of Iliadic similes is thus *primarily visual*. It makes perfect sense, then, that the existing discussions of the aesthetic question analyze the poem's similes in primarily visual terms.

That being said, however, I do not believe that the similes of the *Iliad* may *only* have visual functions; some exhibit another sensory component in addition to their visuality, and others even seem to be primarily non-visual. I will thus use the remainder of this paper to investigate an element of the *Iliad's* similes that I feel has received too little attention in the literature, namely their auditory component. Some clarifying statements and important distinctions must be made, however, before fully engaging in this proposed analysis.

First, by "auditory" I do not mean to describe the effect a given simile might have on the listener if read aloud, but rather the specifically aural effect a given simile has on the reader or listener's mental construction of a scene. Second, I distinguish between similes that are *primarily auditory* and those that are primarily non-auditory but that I take to have some interesting and significant *auditory component*. I will analyze both of these sub-classes in an attempt to show some measure of thematic cohesiveness among the sound similes, but I will address them independently, seeing as they do seem to display two non-trivially distinct types of auditory function. After offering an analysis of these strands of thematic cohesion and addressing problematic outliers to the observed patterns, I will conclude with the claim that auditory similes in the *Iliad* constitute an interesting and functionally dynamic sub-category of Iliadic simile that deserves further consideration from scholars interested in answering the aesthetic question.

It must be noted here that it is not the case that auditory similes have heretofore received *no* treatment in the literature. In

his “The Function of the Homeric Simile,” Michael Coffey includes *sound* as one of his six functional categories of Iliadic simile, along with *movement, appearance, a situation, psychological characteristics,* and the *measurement of space, time, and numbers* (118). He rightly identifies many of the similes that will be considered in the forthcoming discussion as primarily sound similes, but he does not contribute much else to the investigation. He groups these similes into a single category and points out that sound similes can be about both the noises of battle and the sounds of non-battle, but he does not offer anything resembling an account of cohesive themes or observable patterns among his examples. As such, his *sound* category is the most theoretically underdeveloped and lacking in unifying themes of his six categories, thereby leaving plenty of room for further analysis. Furthermore, Coffey does not address the distinction between primarily auditory similes and similes with an auditory component, failing to consider the fact that a *situation* simile, for example, might have an interesting and significant auditory component. Thus, while Coffey recognized well before I did that auditory similes are a viable sub-class of Iliadic simile, I believe that my analysis contributes something novel to the discussion.

With this necessary survey of Coffey’s account completed, I now turn my attention to discussing the similes that can be properly categorized as *primarily auditory*. These primarily auditory similes are not nearly as ubiquitous as those that have a primarily visual function, but a careful reading of the *Iliad* reveals a workable number of examples, which I now present in order of their appearance in the text. The voices of a group of Trojan elders are compared to “cicadas perched on a branch, / Their delicate voices shrill in the woods” (III. 158-159), and when Poseidon shouts on the battlefield, the sound of his voice is said to be “So loud it seemed that ten thousand warriors / Had been enlisted by Ares and shouted

at once" (XIV. 145-146). The "pulsating roar" of the clashing Greek and Trojan armies is at one point impressively likened to

The *pounding* of surf when arching breakers
Roll in from the deep under painful northern winds,
Or the *hissing* of a forest fire
When it climbs the hills to burn all the woods,
Or the *howling* of wind when it is angry with oaks
And *moans* and *shrieks* through their leafy branches. (XIV.
399-408)

As he is dying from a spear-wound inflicted by Patroclus, Sarpedon groans "like some tawny, spirited bull a lion has killed" (XVI. 522-524). Achilles' divinely amplified shout is compared to "the piercing sound of horns / when squadrons come to destroy a city" (XVIII. 234-235), and both Hippodamas' death-bellow and Scamander's roaring against Achilles are, as in the Sarpedon example, compared to the sound of a bull (XX. 231-232, XXI. 410). It is clear that each of these similes is instrumental in *sonically* amplifying the reader or listener's experience of the scene; the audience member, through these comparisons, mentally constructs the scene with a vivid aural engagement. Furthermore, it seems that facilitating this sort of aural engagement is primarily what these specific similes are *for*; thus, their designation as similes with a primarily auditory function is justified. Pointing out that primarily auditory similes simply exist, however, is uninteresting. Thus, the natural next step in this analysis is to search for unifying patterns that grant stable thematic cohesion to the body of examples.

Perhaps the most apparent pattern for this group of similes is that the sounds of individual humans are consistently compared to sounds of individual animals. The voices of Priam, Panthous, Thymoetes, Lampus, *et al.* are likened to the "delicate voices" of a group of cicadas; this parallel between the two groups (group of

elders and group of insects) can be interpretively deconstructed into a relationship between the *individuals* of one group and the *individuals* of the other. Thus, each elder Trojan corresponds to *one* of the cicadas “perched on a branch,” and therefore this simile fits the pattern of single human-to-animal fit, as the sounds of several *individual* humans correspond to the sounds of several *individual* animals. The other two similes reflective of this pattern require no such interpretive move; the one-to-one correspondences between Sarpedon’s groans and a “tawny, spirited bull” and Hippiodamas’ bellow and the “way a bull / will bellow when dragged by young men / around Poseidon’s altar” are clear (XX. 415-418).

This theme of individual human sounds compared to individual animal sounds thereby provides a relatively stable pattern to which we can contrast the auditory simile involving armies. While I have provided only one example of an auditory army simile, I believe that a cohesive theme can nevertheless be established due to the multiple comparisons embedded in the example. In this simile, the roar of the embattled Greeks and Trojans is compared not only to the “pounding surf” but also to “hissing fire” and “howling wind” (XIV. 400-405). These three comparisons are connected in that they are all *forces of nature*; they go beyond all human capacity to control and bring with them the threat of imminent destruction. These themes of comparing armies to forces of nature while comparing individual humans to individual animals are independently cohesive, but they also interact *with one another* in an interesting and dynamic way. Animals, like individual humans, are largely under the human power to control and have limited destructive capability. Armies, on the other hand, are like oceans, forest fires, and windstorms—irrepressible and nearly limitless in their destructive power. Thus, we have before us a stable theme that provides a cohesive grounding for the primarily auditory similes: the sounds of *individual humans* are compared to the sounds of *individual animals*

while the sounds of *armies* are compared to the sounds of *forces of nature*, perhaps in order to highlight and reinforce the immense destructive potential of armies.

It must be pointed out, however, that this unifying pattern has been constructed without properly integrating three of the above examples: Poseidon's shout, Achilles' shout, and Scamander's being compared to a bull. These three similes do not at first glance fit easily into this newly explicated interpretive schema, but perhaps under closer inspection they are not as problematic as they may initially seem. Consider Poseidon's shout; this simile is certainly an outlier in that there is no precedent within the auditory similes for a god being compared to a horde of mortals. While certainly puzzling at first, I believe that this simile can be integrated into the pattern formulated above by interpreting it as follows. Poseidon, as the Earthshaker and God of the Sea, represents in a very strong sense a *force of nature*, the force of earthquakes and sea storms. He is compared to "ten thousand warriors" that have been "enlisted by Ares," i.e. an *army* of ten-thousand men. Thus, this simile is merely another example of the established army-as-force-of-nature pattern; the comparison simply runs from nature to army instead of from army to nature.

Achilles' shout cannot be integrated into the pattern quite as gracefully, but it can be shown that, at the very least, this simile does not threaten to *destabilize* the pattern. The comparison of Achilles' voice to that of "the piercing sound of horns / When squadrons come to destroy a city" is highly peculiar; it is unique among the auditory similes in that the object of comparison is a man-made (or, at least, man-altered, depending on what is meant by "horn") construction. Thus, we have a problematic instance in which an individual human is compared to something other than an individual animal. This is not surprising, however, in the case of Achilles. We might even expect, due to his characterization in Books 19 through 22, for him to be compared to a force of nature

and thus be figured as closer to an army (or a god) than to a single man, but this is not the case. Instead he is compared to the sounding of trumpets, and it is not initially clear how to interpret this. I propose that it is best understood as indicative of Achilles' intermediary status between god and man. To elucidate: A trumpet sounds louder than any one man (or animal) can shout, but it is not as powerful as the crashing of the sea or the howling of the winds. Thus, Achilles' comparison to a chorus of trumpets indicates that he is capable of far more than regular human beings, but he is not quite a force of nature (*i.e.* not quite a Poseidon) in that he does not transcend the jurisdiction of human control. He is, after all, ultimately killed by another mortal. The comparison of Achilles' shout to the sound of horns therefore remains an outlier, but an outlier that can be explained *in terms of* the observed pattern, and thus does not threaten to destabilize the cohesive theme.

The simile comparing Scamander—a force of nature—to a bull is more insolubly problematic. This simile explicitly misaligns the expected comparative relationships of an auditory simile and does not present any possible interpretation in which the problem might be resolved. In order to accommodate this difficulty, however, I feel that it is important to consider what may be reasonably expected from a proposed pattern of the *Iliad's* aesthetic elements. The poem is, most scholars contend, the product of a long, organic oral tradition; there was likely no systematic process of creation, and therefore to expect the work to adhere to any strict systematic interpretive schema without *any* outliers or counterexamples is too strong a requirement.

With the general cohesive pattern for primarily auditory similes thus formulated, subjected to problematic outliers, and successfully defended, I will now turn my attention to examining those similes that I take to have some significant auditory component. The first I will examine is one of the most famous of the

Iliad's similes, found in Book 12 during the Trojan assault on the Greek wall:

Snow flurries fall thick on a winter's day
When Zeus in his cunning rouses himself
To show humans the ammunition he has.
He lulls the winds and he snows and snows
Until he has covered all the mountain tops,
Headlands and meadows and men's plowed fields.
And the snow falls over the harbors
And the shores of the grey sea, and only
The waves keep it off. The rest of the world
Is enveloped in the winter tempest of Zeus.
The stones flew thick upon the Trojans
And upon the Greeks, and the wooden wall
Was beaten like a drum along its whole length. (XII. 287-299)

This particularly rich simile may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Its primary immediate function is, arguably, to represent *visually* the stones that fall from the Greek wall; the comparison of the stones to snowflakes creates a mental image of countless chunks of debris inundating the troops on both sides. Considered within the broader context of the poem's holistic program of similes, the "snow flurries" simile interacts symbiotically with the overarching motif of young warriors being compared to vegetation (such as the aforementioned Gorgythion simile). Just as a blanket of freezing snow snuffs out vegetative life, so too do the stones cut short the lives of many young Trojan and Greek warriors. One of the more intriguing interpretations in the literature is put forward by David Porter in his "Violent Juxtaposition in the Similes of the *Iliad*," in which he argues that this simile, as a scene of *calm in nature*, functions to create a "violent juxtaposition" with the scene of battle

in which it is nested, thus heightening the poem's sense of the vicious and destructive nature of war (17-18). While Porter's interpretation is not necessarily authoritative, it is nevertheless highly relevant to the current discussion in that this "violent juxtaposition" is achieved in large part by the hitherto unexamined *auditory component* of the simile, something that Porter himself does not address. As such, I now move to examine this auditory component and its function in facilitating a violent juxtaposition.

Although the language of the simile does not explicitly provoke it, there seems to be a prominent sonic element to the reader's or listener's mental construction of the "snow flurries" scene. While the primary component is certainly the *visual* experience of picturing lightly falling snow, there is an important corresponding *auditory* component—the soft impact of flakes settling on a snowbank, the gentle whisper of the wind in a peaceful flurry, etc. Once this subtle auditory component is articulated, the manner by which a "violent juxtaposition" is thereby sonically achieved becomes clear. This serene, near silent aural construction in the mind of the reader or listener is immediately and violently juxtaposed with the cacophony of the battle in which the simile is nested. Interestingly, the language of the text directly following the simile *does* in fact explicitly refer to sound: "and the wooden wall / Was *beaten like a drum*" (XII. 298-299). This drum reference (itself a miniature sound simile) practically necessitates an auditory contrast to be made between the tranquil aural character of the simile and the chaotic din of the Trojan assault. Thus, it seems, the implicit auditory component of the "snow flurries" simile is the primary means through which a violent juxtaposition, and resultant intensification of the poem's sense of the brutality and pandemonium of war, is achieved.

This connection between a simile's auditory component and the concept of violent juxtaposition can be seen in at least one other

example. When Hector decides against supplicating Achilles in Book 22, he says to himself,

This is no time
For talking, the way a boy and a girl
Whisper to each other from oak tree or rock
A boy and a girl with all their sweet talk.
Better to lock up in mortal combat
As soon as possible and see to whom
God on Olympus grants the victory. (XXII. 143-148)

This simile, like the “snow flurries” simile, does not appear to be primarily auditory. While it is true that a sound element (whispering) is mentioned explicitly, the visual aspect of the boy and girl spatially situated amongst the landscape of oaks and rocks is perhaps the simile’s most vital component. It is possible to disagree with this claim, but, at the very least, I take this ambiguity in discerning this simile’s primary function as reason enough to classify it as an instance of the “auditory component” category rather than the “primarily auditory” category. Porter argues that this simile functions to create a violent juxtaposition because it compares war to the *life of children*. This is not incorrect, but it is also not the *only* way in which a violent juxtaposition is achieved by the simile. I contend that, just as in the “snow flurries” example, the auditory component of the “whispering boy/ girl” simile *itself* contributes to the creation of a violent juxtaposition. Thus, two separate but related juxtapositions are created by the same simile through the comparison of children to warriors and whispering to sounds of battle (war-cries, etc.) in both the past conflicts of the poem and the approaching clash of Hector and Achilles. Thus, for both of these examined *auditory component* examples, it holds true that the similes in this category function, at least insofar as their

sonic element is concerned, to facilitate a violent juxtaposition between their sound component and the sounds of war.

Now that cohesive themes have been established for both the “primarily auditory” and “auditory component” sub-classes, I will conclude by attempting to synthesize the observations of the preceding discussion in order to offer a definitive pattern for the sound similes of the *Iliad*. Similes that are primarily auditory have been shown to compare individual humans to individual animals and armies to forces of nature, and the problematic cases of Achilles and Poseidon have been successfully integrated into this schema. Furthermore, primarily auditory similes have the feature of what I will now refer to as “natural correspondence”—*i.e.* these similes create something completely the opposite of a “violent juxtaposition.” There is a natural and unsurprising correspondence between the roar of two armies clashing and the roar of the sea, for example. Auditory component similes, on the other hand, have been shown to facilitate violent juxtapositions through comparing their sonic element to the sounds of war. To recapitulate: primarily auditory similes, in addition to the more specific patterns discussed above, create natural correspondences between compared scenes; auditory component similes, by contrast, create violent juxtapositions between compared scenes. Since a divergence of function between the two sub-classes was anticipated, this analysis seems to be a relatively satisfying, stable account of cohesion among the body of provided examples.

The account presented in this paper is not meant to be taken as a conclusive or decisive analysis of auditory similes in the *Iliad*. It is highly possible, perhaps probable, that I have either missed instances of what might be properly called “auditory” similes in the poem, or failed to recognize interesting connections among them, or both. At the very least, however, I hope to have shown that sound similes constitute an interesting and functionally versatile category of Iliadic simile, and by doing so encourage more

scholarly attention to be focused on this currently underrepresented aesthetic component of the epic.

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